



The Peloponnesian War, Stupidity, and Imperialism

By Massimo Pigliucci

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Introduction

It is only for the sake of the general weal that we Lacedaemonians have any right to be forcing liberty upon those who would rather not have it. (Brasidas, Spartan General, in Thucydides, IV.87)

I am a scientist and philosopher of science, with an interest in applied ancient philosophy (things like Stoicism, Skepticism, and the like). So why on earth did I put together a booklet on the Peloponnesian War?

Two reasons, one practical, one a bit more fundamental. The practical reason is that I just finished writing a book on the relationship between ethics and politics, largely focused on the ancient Greco-Roman world (the provisional title is: *The Quest for Character – What the Story of Socrates and Alcibiades Teaches Us About Our Search for Good Leaders*, Basic Books, due out in Fall 2022). The first draft of the book had a long chapter on the Peloponnesian War which, in the end, my editor and I decided to cut. But I didn't want to waste over 15,000 words of writing, so here it is!

The more fundamental reason for the booklet you are about to read is that I have always been fascinated with this episode in the history of ancient Greece, featuring larger-than-life characters like Socrates, Pericles, Alcibiades, Brasidas, and, of course, Thucydides, who told the story for posterity. We have much to learn, even today, from a deep dive into the history of that war that forever reshaped the

Mediterranean world and led to the destruction not just of Athens, but of the entire Hellas, paving the way for the conquest of Alexander the Great.

As the title of this booklet anticipates, it is a story of imperialism and stupidity on both sides. But it's also a very human story of bravery and resilience. I hope you will enjoy the story, and take to heart its lessons.

–Massimo Pigliucci

1-The wars before the great war (547 – 432 BCE)

What you are about to read is a story that still today captures our imagination, and from which scholars as well as politicians keep drawing lessons and parallels with modern events. As it is often the case, the Peloponnesian War was, in part, the result of another great conflict, the Greco-Persian wars that marked the early part of the 5th century BCE. In turn, the Peloponnesian War will pave the way for yet more conflicts and massive historical changes, culminating with the Macedonian conquest of Greece by Philip II and his son Alexander the Great.

Our major sources concerning the Peloponnesian War are two figures who participated in it, who were larger than life in their own time, and who have become even more so with the passing of the centuries: Thucydides and Xenophon.

Thucydides was an Athenian general, who during the war was sent to relieve the strategically crucial city of Amphipolis during the winter of 424-423 BCE. The city was under attack by the brilliant Spartan general Brasidas, who managed to negotiate its surrender before Thucydides' relief army could arrive. The Athenian assembly, distraught by the loss, blamed Thucydides, who was therefore stripped of command and exiled, as he himself explains:

I lived through the whole of it, being of an age to comprehend events, and giving my attention to them in order to know the exact truth about them. It was also my fate to be an exile from my country for twenty years after my command at Amphipolis; and being present with both parties, and more especially with the Peloponnesians by reason of my exile, I had leisure to observe affairs somewhat particularly. [History of the Peloponnesian War, V.26]

Thucydides' personal loss, however, became history's invaluable gain, since he was able to travel throughout Greece and either witness in person the events he later narrated, or talk to many of the major players in the conflict. While he was an Athenian, Thucydides consciously strove to assess things in as impartial a fashion as possible, which is why still today he is considered the founder of "scientific" history. Moreover, and equally importantly, he was among the first to write about the unfolding events without any invocation of gods and supernatural forces, grounding his understanding instead solely on his grasp of human nature and inferred relations of cause and effect.

Specifically, Thucydides developed a theory of human behavior that he deployed to understand people's responses in situations of crisis, from wars to plagues. Ultimately, he thought, what people do, and, as a consequence, what happens to their cities and states, is the result of the very universal human emotions of fear and the drive toward self-interest. In a sense, Thucydides was the forerunner of the notion of political realism, eventually articulated in detail by Niccolò Machiavelli.

The conflict lasted from 431 to 404 BCE, but Thucydides' account suddenly breaks off, basically in mid sentence, with the events that transpired in the year 411 BCE. It is not clear why Thucydides interrupted the narrative so abruptly, as he is supposed to have died several years later, in 400 BCE. Regardless, the story is picked up by Xenophon and detailed in his book, *Hellenica*.

Xenophon is an equally fascinating, and yet entirely different character from Thucydides. He also was a general, though too young at the time of the Peloponnesian War to participate in the conflict. He was a close friend of Socrates, and we are indebted to him for an alternative account of Socrates' life, the *Memorabilia*, as well as of his death, in the *Apology* – accounts that differ in interesting respects from those given by Socrates' most famous student, Plato.

Xenophon was a brilliant commander, credited to be the first one to enact flanking maneuvers and feints against the enemy. He had a much wider cultural experience than Thucydides because he fought for Sparta (possibly the cause of his exile from Athens) and most famously for the Persian prince Cyrus the Younger. When Cyrus attempted (and eventually failed) to overthrow his brother Artaxerxes II, Xenophon found himself with an army of ten thousand Greek mercenaries engaged at the battle of Cunaxa, near Babylon, on the left bank of the Euphrates. In his book, *Anabasis*, he recounts how he led the survivors all the way back to friendly territory, in an astonishing journey marked by such feats of military strategy that Xenophon has been referred to as the greatest general before Alexander the Great. Someone ought to do a Hollywood movie on the march of the ten thousand, one of these days.

Xenophon was well positioned to continue Thucydides' work, as he personally witnessed the return of the flamboyant Alcibiades to Athens in 407 BCE, the infamous trial of the Athenian generals the following year, and finally, in 403 BCE, the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants established by Sparta as a puppet government to keep in check the defeated Athenians. But I am getting ahead of myself, so let me return to the causes of the Peloponnesian War. Modern historians agree that there were several contributing episodes that led up to the war. Thucydides mentions a number of these but fundamentally states:

The real though unavowed cause I believe to have been the growth of the Athenian power, which terrified the Lacedaemonians [Spartans] and forced them into war.
[History of the Peloponnesian War, I.23]

How did the Athenians become such a menace to their former allies against the mighty Persian invader? To understand that let's take a bit of a temporal detour, jumping back all the way to 547 BCE, when the Persian king Cyrus the Great subjugated the city states of Greek Ionia (modern day western Turkey). The Persians struggled to keep control over the independent-minded Greek cities, and endeavored to stabilize the situation by installing a number of "tyrants" (i.e., absolute rulers) at the head of puppet governments. One such tyrant, Aristagoras of Miletus, didn't perform well when he led a Persian-supported expedition against the island of Naxos, in the Cyclades. Possibly because he knew he would be replaced by his masters, Aristagoras made a desperate gamble and incited the Ionian cities to rebel against the Persians.

The resulting Ionian revolt spread like fire, and Athens got involved at the invitation of the increasingly emboldened Aristagoras. The Ionians – with Athenian help – captured and destroyed Sardis, the regional Persian capital, something that did not go well at all with the Persian king then in charge, Darius, also nicknamed “the Great.” After a prolonged conflict, Darius was finally able to defeat the rebel forces in 494 BCE, but by now had developed a new respect for the surprisingly combative Greeks. He wanted to secure his holdings, and figured that the best way to do so was to mount nothing less than a full scale invasion of Greece, which he began in 492 BCE. Two years later a Persian expeditionary force conquered the entirety of the Cyclades and moved on with the intent of attacking Athens itself. The decisive confrontation took place at the famous battle of Marathon, where the Athenians, supported by their Plataean allies, decisively defeated the Persians.

That ended the first Persian invasion, yet Darius wasn’t done with the Greeks. But he died in 486 BCE, leaving his son, Xerxes, to finish planning the next invasion. Xerxes put together the largest army the Mediterranean world had seen up to that point, and personally led his men in the second Persian attempt to invade mainland Greece in 480 BCE. His forces suffered a setback at the battle of Thermopylae, which featured the valiant and suicidal resistance of the famous 300 led by the Spartan king, Leonidas, who – together with a few more hundred soldiers from Thebes and Thespieae, were able to block the much larger Persian army for three full days.

The Persians finally managed to advance thanks to the infamous Ephialtes, son of Eurydemus of Malis, a local who betrayed the Greeks and showed the Persians a way to get around the allied position and attack from behind. I doubt Eurydemus realized that his ignominy would still be remembered 25 centuries later! The Persian army made it to Athens, which had been evacuated in the meantime, and burned the place down. However, the Persians suffered a catastrophic defeat at Salamis, courtesy of the Athenian navy commanded by Themistocles. Before leaving their city, the Athenians had sent an inquiry to the Oracle at Delphi about the best way to deal with the seemingly unstoppable Persian onslaught. The cryptic answer was: “Though all else shall be taken, Zeus, the all seeing, grants that the wooden wall only shall not fail.”

Themistocles, legend goes, understood the message of the god: they should leave the indefensible city, but confront the invaders by way of a “wooden wall,” meaning a well armed fleet of trireme ships. Herodotus tells us that there were 378 Athenian and allied ships at Salamis, facing a whopping 1,207 Persian vessels. Themistocles was able to prevail nevertheless because he lured the Persians into the narrow Strait of Salamis, where their superior numbers didn’t count as much as the higher maneuverability of the Greek side. It was a disaster of hitherto unknown proportions for the invaders. Herodotus says that the following year the Persian fleet was reduced to just 300 triremes.

But the Greeks were not done. They went on the offensive in 479 BCE, decisively defeating the Persians on land at the battle of Plataea. According to Herodotus, about 100,000

Greeks from Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Megara, and a number of other city-states faced 350,000 Persians and their allies, which included Boeotians, Macedonians, and Thessalians. The Persian general Mardonius made a blunder when he decided to pursue the Greeks, on temporary retreat, to higher ground. This gave the Greeks the advantage, despite being surrounded by Persian forces, and Mardonius paid for the mistake with his life.

Herodotus' numbers are a bit hard to believe, but he claims that the Greeks lost only 159 soldiers, while the Persians left 257,000 dead on the battlefield. Other ancient sources give a more probable figure of 10,000 dead among the Greeks. Regardless of the estimates, Plataea put an end to Persian ambitions in Greece for a while.

And here is when the historical developments begin to set up the prelude for what became the Peloponnesian War. The Spartan general Pausanias, who was at Plataea, was accused of being in league with the Persians because he had released some Persian prisoners who were relatives of Xerxes. Pausanias argued that the prisoners had simply escaped. Be that as it may, he was recalled to Sparta, and yet the episode sowed distrust of the Lacedaemonians among the rest of the Greek allies. This catalyzed a significant shift in leadership in favor of Athens, which organized the Delian League, named after the sacred island that hosted the joint treasury of the participating cities. It was the Delian League, without Sparta, that continued the fight against the Persians, which finally led to the liberation of the Ionian cities that had been subjugated by Cyrus almost a century before.

What followed was a period that Thucydides refers to as “pentecontaetia,” meaning fifty years, during which Athens consolidated its influence in the region, becoming a de facto empire. Its satellite states would pay regular monetary tribute to be housed on Delos, with the aim of financing any further defensive military action against the Persians. Yet the Delian treasure increasingly became diverted to fund not just the Athenian fleet, but even public works in Athens itself. It is not by chance that this period is referred to as the Athenian golden age. It was also, however, a period of increased friction with the Peloponnesian states, and especially Sparta.

Things came to a head in 459 BCE. Corinth and Megara, both Spartan allies, entered into a conflict, and Athens managed to ally itself with Megara, which would have given the Athenians an important foothold on the strategically crucial Isthmus of Corinth. Needless to say, neither the Spartans nor the Corinthians would stand for that, and the hostilities quickly devolved into what is often referred to as the First Peloponnesian War, to distinguish it from the Great Peloponnesian War that followed it. The First War lasted 15 years and ended with a stalemate subsequent to a massive land invasion of Attica by Sparta. Greece was now a bipolar region: gone was the Hellenic League that had defeated the Persians, headed jointly by Sparta and Athens. The geopolitical scenario now pitted the Delian League under the leadership of Athens in Attica against the Peloponnesian League under the influence of Sparta. The Thirty Year Peace signed between the two Leagues in the winter of 446-445 BCE did not last half that time.

Thucydides tells us that one of various episodes that triggered the resumption of hostilities was the matter of Potidaea. This was yet another former colony of Corinth that had in the meantime become a tributary of Athens. The Potidaeans were apparently none too happy about having to pay their tributes, so much so that the Athenians at some point got tired of the Potidaeans' insubordination and ordered them to tear down their defensive walls as well as to expel the resident Corinthian magistrates. In response, Corinth promised military support to Potidaea if they finally rebelled against Athens. This was a clear violation of the Thirty Years' Peace.

The resulting Battle of Potidaea of 432 BCE is interesting not only because it was yet another prelude to the Peloponnesian War, but because both Socrates and his friend and student Alcibiades fought in it, and were in fact protagonists of a remarkable episode. Socrates was 38 years old, while Alcibiades was just 18. At Potidaea the Athenians faced a combined force of locals, Corinthians, Spartans, and Macedonians under Perdiccas, who was a former ally of Athens but had turned against the city. Athens engaged a total of 70 ships and 3,000 hoplites, pitted against about 1,600 hoplites, 400 additional light troops, and 200 cavalry on the other side. The Athenians won the day, raising a "trophy" as a result. Our modern use of the word "trophy" is derived from the ancient Greeks' memorial for a battle raised by the winners. These ancient trophies were made of the captured weapons and standards of the defeated enemy. The Athenian success, however, turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory. The Potidaeans did not surrender after their loss on the battlefield, and instead retrenched inside their city walls. The Athenians then began to lay a siege,

which will last until the year 430-429 BCE, and will cost Athens up to one thousand talents per year, a huge sum.

We have various reports of what Socrates and Alcibiades did at Potidaea, from Plato's Symposium and Charmides, Diogenes Laertius' Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers, and Plutarch's Lives. This is how Plutarch describes the events:

While still a stripling, [Alcibiades] served as a soldier in the campaign of Potidaea, and had Socrates for his tent-mate and comrade in action. A fierce battle took place, wherein both of them distinguished themselves; but when Alcibiades fell wounded, it was Socrates who stood over him and defended him, and with the most conspicuous bravery saved him, armor and all. The prize of valor fell to Socrates, of course, on the justest calculation; but the generals, owing to the high position of Alcibiades, were manifestly anxious to give him the glory of it. Socrates, therefore, wishing to increase his pupil's honorable ambitions, led all the rest in bearing witness to his bravery, and in begging that the crown and the suit of armor be given to him. [Plutarch, Alcibiades, VII.2]

The episode tells us something important about both Socrates' and Alcibiades' characters. Socrates showed an incredible amount of courage in battle, as well as loyalty toward his friend, who was in great difficulty. In the aftermath of the battle he also acted in accordance with his philosophy: external things, like medals and praise, are simply not important. What is important is to do the right thing. Alcibiades, by contrast – while also certainly brave in battle – just as clearly showed that his priorities were precisely the reverse of those of his mentor. He very much

craved recognition and praise, even at the cost of taking it away from his own friend and savior, who obviously deserved it far more. These contrasting patterns will mark the entire lives of these two men.

The events described so far, and others that I have to skip over in the interest of space, triggered a meeting of the Peloponnesian League in Sparta, at which the Corinthians urged war. An unofficial Athenian delegation was also present, and its members reminded the Spartans of the two cities' joint successes against the Persians, inviting them to seek arbitration if they truly believed that the terms of the Thirty Years' Peace had been broken. But this was too little too late: a majority of the assembly voted in favor of war, and the fateful conflict began to unfold.

2-Imperialism, plague, and the complex morality of war (431 – 425 BCE)

A *ll men are energetic when they are making a beginning. At that time the youth of Peloponnesus and the youth of Athens were numerous; they had never seen war, and were therefore very willing to take up arms.*
[History of the Peloponnesian War, II.8]

In a bewildering pattern that will repeat itself many times throughout human history, all the way to the wars of the 20th century and beyond, the populations of both Sparta and Athens, and especially their young men, greeted the beginning of hostilities with enthusiasm, evidently having little notion of the fact that many of them will soon lose their lives or will see friends and loved ones die.

The two sides were different in a crucial way that helps us making sense of much of the dynamics that characterized the very long conflict. The Spartans and their allies were essentially invincible on land, capable of quickly fielding large armies for which the Athenians had no match. However, the preeminence of Athens on the sea was just as unquestionable, maritime routes being crucial to the Athenian empire. Moreover, after their city had been sacked by the Persians, the Athenians had learned a very valuable lesson: they should never again allow an enemy force to cut them off from their maritime supply lines. They therefore began construction of the famous Long Walls,

which connected the city and its acropolis with the port of Piraeus.

The Spartan strategy early on in the war was to occupy Attica and lay waste to the territory surrounding Athens, in order to cripple the Athenian economy and possibly starve the population. They were able to do this with impunity because of their overwhelming advantage on land. Spartan dominance, however, was far less impressive than it might appear at first glance. For one thing, soldiers in ancient Greece were also expected to get back home and take care of their own land and harvest, which meant that such “invasions” would only last for a few weeks during the summer. Accordingly, the longest period of occupation throughout the war was about forty days. More importantly, the damage inflicted on Athens by the repeated invasions of Attica was, at least early on, relatively minor, because it was offset by the supplies that kept coming uninterrupted via sea from the Athenian colonies and tributaries. And the Long Walls made sure that the Spartans could not interfere with the resupplying traffic.

Pericles was the *strategos* (military leader) in charge of the Athenian conduct of the war, and his approach was simple and, potentially, very effective: do not challenge the Spartans in open field, and instead rely on the fleet to both keep the city well provided and inflict losses to members of the Peloponnesian League. He encouraged the Athenians to move from the countryside – ravaged by the Spartans – to the city, enjoying the protection afforded by its impenetrable walls.

But not everyone in Athens was happy with Pericles' conservative strategy. For one thing, many people ended up being displaced and having to live in a city where they had neither dwelling nor resources. Moreover, the Spartans at one point got within seven miles of Athens itself, having taken control of Acharnae, the largest deme within the immediate Athenian territory. Seeing the enemy so near was a disturbing spectacle for the Athenians.

The first casualties started coming in, and Pericles was chosen to speak at the burial, where he gave his famous Funeral Oration. The speech, as reported by Thucydides, is remarkable for its unashamed defense and glorification of Athenian imperialism. Pericles told his fellow citizens that theirs was a great city, entitled to enjoy the fruits of the whole earth, flowing in from countless other places in Greece. He boldly stated that only the Athenians did good to their neighbors not out of a calculation of interest, but because of their freedom and their indomitable spirit. Athenians should be in awe of the greatness of their city and remember that it was achieved by the hard work of men who "knew their duty and had the courage to do it." [History of the Peloponnesian War, II.43]

And so ended the first year of the Great Peloponnesian War. The second year, 430 BCE, began very much like the previous one, with the Spartan army again invading Attica and taking control of the countryside. This time, however, they had been there only a few days when news spread that the plague had struck Athens. Thucydides tells us that the plague probably originated in Ethiopia, spread through Egypt and Libya, and finally arrived at Athens, where it quickly took hold due to the massive overcrowding

triggered by Pericles' defensive strategy. To this day we do not know for certain which specific pathogen was responsible, though the dominant opinion is that it was bubonic plague, caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. In the mid 1990s archeologists uncovered a mass grave in Athens that supports Thucydides' account.

Eventually, Pericles himself, as well as his sons, died of the plague. So did about 30,000 Athenians, between one and two thirds of the entire population, a massive blow to their military and navy, from which the city did not recover until 415 BCE, after two more waves of the plague. Thucydides also contracted, and survived, the disease, and provides us with vivid descriptions of what happened:

No human art was of any avail, and as to supplications in temples, enquiries of oracles, and the like, they were utterly useless. [History of the Peloponnesian War, II.47]

Thucydides observed widespread despondency among those struck by the plague, with people abandoning any hope as soon as they felt sick. Moreover, the disease had a sudden and radical effect on the Athenians' philosophy of life. They saw rich people die suddenly, and their property inherited by others who up to that point had had little or nothing. As a result, they vividly appreciated how everything in life is transitory, and resolved to enjoy whatever they could for as long as it lasted. Hedonism became the guiding principle, which meant that ideals of virtue, courage, temperance, and so forth quickly went out of the window, thus causing further damage to the morale of the citizens.

Pericles insisted that his strategy of containment was the right one, evidently not realizing that he had made the effects of the plague so much worse. The people were not convinced, and they actually fined their leader. Then again, in an early sign of the fickleness of the Athenian assembly, which will cause so much trouble later on, they reversed themselves and re-elected Pericles general, trusting him to continue the war effort.

In fact, Thucydides observes that as the conflict raged on it became clear that the Athenians were capable of remarkable resilience. They came back from the ravages of the plague, they recovered – as we shall see – from the disastrous invasion of Sicily, and they continued their resistance even after Cyrus, the son of the Persian king, began to financially and militarily support the Peloponnesian League. In the end, says Thucydides, the Athenians were their own worst enemies, causing their own destruction because of the fickleness and irrationality of their decisions.

3-Shall we kill the Mytilenaeans?

After the death of Pericles the more hawkish party took control of Athens, especially in the person of Cleon, son of Cleaenetus. An early episode that sees him as a protagonist, and that provides us with an illuminating insight into Athenian politics at the time, occurred in response to the defection of Mytilenè, on the island of Lesbos. The Mytilenaeans had been allied, not subjects, of Athens, but had decided to switch sides and aid the Peloponnesian League. The Athenians were incensed, and looking for revenge.

The Mytilenaeen revolt began during the third year of the war, in 428 BCE, when the inhabitants of the city forcibly made it the capital of the island of Lesbos (which is still the case today). Athens did not initially react, because it was suffering from the plague, and because Lesbos was a naval power in its own right, thus likely to oppose significant resistance. Eventually, however, the Athenians had to face the reality that Lesbos was too important to lose, so they sent forty ships to settle the affair. The first engagement ended in a stalemate and the Mytilenaeans sent a peace mission to negotiate in Athens. But they were apparently not too optimistic about its prospects, because they also simultaneously sent a request to Sparta for help.

Predictably, hostilities resumed on the island, and again came to a stalemate. The Athenian forces were able to impose a naval blockade, but the Mytilenaeans remained in

control of much of Lesbos. Meanwhile, the Mytilenaeen delegation to Sparta was told to go to Olympia, where the games were in progress, and await there for the opportunity to make their case, once the festival – during which no hostilities could be carried out – was over.

Thucydides reports the outline of the speech given by the Mytilenaeans, and from it we learn that they were keenly aware of suffering from an issue of trust with Sparta. After all, they had been allied with Athens and they were now betraying their former associates in order to join a difference alliance. The ambassadors from Lesbos explained that they became allies of Athens during the effort against Persia, after Sparta had withdrawn from the Hellenic League. This was in order to help defend Greece from the invader, not to aid Athens in subjugating the rest of Hellas. The Mytilenaeans had then witnessed to their increasing dismay that one after the other Athens' allies had been reduced to vassal states, and feared they would be next. That is why Mytilenè had preemptively rebelled and sought the support of Sparta.

The Mytilenaeen ambassadors then shifted tone, from making a prudential case in defense of their defection to making one to the advantage of Lacedaemon (Sparta):

The Athenians are exhausted by pestilence and by a costly war; some of their ships are cruising about your shores; the remainder are threatening us; so that they are not likely to have many to spare if you, in the course of this summer, make a second attack upon them by land and by sea. (History of the Peloponnesian War, III.13)

The Mytilenaeans pointed out what was in fact an important strategic truth: the war was not going to be won by invading Attica, but rather by controlling or securing the alliance of those cities and islands that supported Attica, of which Lesbos was a prime example. The speech ended with a call for the Spartans to be the leader of a free Hellas – ironically, pretty much the same claim the Athenians made on their own behalf. I guess imperialist powers always cloak themselves in the mantle of freedom. At any rate, the ambassadors were successful, and Mytilenè was admitted into the Peloponnesian League.

The Spartan allies, however, were slow to move in succor of Mytilenè, while the Athenians dispatched more ships and men to lay the siege, under the command of Paches, son of Epicurus (not the philosopher). They erected a fortified wall around the city, settling in for a winter during which it was now blockaded by both sea and land. By the end of that winter the Spartans managed to smuggle into Mytilenè one of their envoys, Salaethus, who assured the people that the Peloponnesian League was gearing up for their usual annual invasion of Attica, and that moreover forty ships would soon be dispatched to relieve the siege on Lesbos.

The invasion did come, and did inflict suffering on the Athenians, but eventually the Spartans and their allies run out of food and had to retire. And the promised forty ships did not materialize. Moreover, Salaethus committed a strategic blunder: desperate because of the lack of reinforcements, he armed the common citizens of Mytilenè – which was not a democracy, but controlled by an oligarchy. The citizens, once empowered, immediately revolted, refusing to fight on behalf of the aristocratic

families and demanding the release of the city's food reserves. At that point, the Mytilenaeans had no choice but to come to terms with the Athenians. They made an agreement with Paches that the fate of the Mytilenaeans would be decided by the Athenian assembly.

And this is where one of the most dramatic chapters of the entire war truly begins. The Athenian commander, Paches, sent his Spartan counterpart, Salaethus, back to Athens, together with a number of Mytilenaeans who had been the orchestrators of the revolt. As soon as they arrived Salaethus was put to death, and the Athenians deliberated whether to kill not only the other prisoners, but the entire male population of Mytilenè and sell the women and children into slavery. The resolution was approved, and the Athenians sent a trireme to Lesbos, with orders for Paches to carry out the genocidal sentence.

However, the following day the mood in Athens was a bit more reflective, and many people started having second thoughts about the impending massacre of the Mytilenaeans. A new assembly was called to debate the issue again. The hawkish Cleon, who had previously spoken in favor of the resolution to punish, took the stage once more. Thucydides tells us that he was both highly influential and most violent, and that he addressed his fellow Athenians in the following, rather frank, manner:

You should remember that your empire is a despotism exercised over unwilling subjects, who are always conspiring against you; they do not obey in return for any kindness which you do them to your own injury, but in so far as you are their

masters; they have no love of you, but they are held down by force. (History of the Peloponnesian War, III.37)

He went on preemptively accusing the next speaker – who was expected to put forth the counterargument – of either being disrespectful of the will of the Athenian people or else having accepted a bribe from the enemy. He proceeded to chide the citizens for being easily taken in by sophistry, always dreaming of an ideal state and yet not seeing what is plainly in front of their nose. Cleon also pointed out what he saw as the inconsistency of wishing to maintain an empire while at the same time showing mercy to one's subjects. Athenians, you can't have it both ways!

The response came from Diodotus, the son of Eucrates, who began his speech by pointing out that haste and strong emotions are the enemy of good counsel, which is why it is right that the Athenians reconsider their previous decision with cooler heads. He also replied directly to Cleon's accusations of bribery, stating that that's a cheap move that can easily be made against any opponent without any evidence to back it up, thus undermining not only said opponent, but the interests of the polis, which is deprived of vigorous debate. Seems like things haven't changed much in political discourse over the last 25 centuries.

Interestingly, Diodotus' argument did not hinge on lofty ideals of justice and virtue, but was pure realpolitik. He told the Athenians that he hadn't come in front of them either as an advocate or as an accuser of the Mytilenaeans. He was not interested in the question of their crimes, but rather in what was in the interest of Athens. Even if guilty, they should not be put to death unless this action was to the

advantage of the Athenian people. Likewise, should they be found to be excusable, it doesn't mean they should be spared. The only thing that matters is the good of the state. Machiavelli would have approved.

His disagreement with Cleon, continued Diodotus, was not about whether Athens should remain an empire, or whether it should treat its allies and subjects according to whatever it is advantageous to the city. His disagreement was about what, exactly, such advantage would be. He reminded the Athenians that harsh punishments have been devised and enacted from time immemorial, and yet have failed to curb bad behavior, because people always find motivations to commit crimes, be it poverty, envy, or pride. Diodotus' speech is a stunning insight into human nature, the true motivations of human behavior, and what works and doesn't work in order to curb it. Contemporary research in social psychology has amply confirmed that the death penalty has little deterring effect, and that poverty is a major motivator of crime. Our scientists confirm that people moved by their desires tend to overestimate their chances of succeeding and underestimate the perils they face, just like Diodotus claimed 25 centuries ago.

Diodotus warned that simply putting the Mytilenaeans to death will afford a false sense of security to the Athenians. Moreover, Athens' subjects must not be induced to think that there is no place for repentance, lest they become desperate rather than compliant. Athens should not count on the severity of its laws, but rather on the sagacity of its administration. Instead of harshly punishing revolts the Athenians ought to work hard so that their subjects don't even think about revolting. And if they do, the reaction

ought to be tempered by an eye toward the future, not just triggered by the anger felt in the moment.

There was another aspect of Greek politics that affected the entire Peloponnesian War, and that Diodotus cleverly zeroed on: the perennial contrast between oligarchic and democratic governments. Broadly speaking, members of the Peloponnesian League were governed by oligarchies of aristocrats, while members of the Delian League were democracies. The Mytilenaeen revolt had been engineered by the aristocracy, and Diodotus envisioned the democratic elements within the city, who had voluntarily turned it over in defiance of the oligarchy, to be natural allies of Athens, and therefore – if properly managed – an insurance for the future: “Far more conducive to the maintenance of our empire would it be to suffer wrong willingly, than for the sake of justice to put to death those whom we had better spare.” (History of the Peloponnesian War, III.47)

A second vote was taken, and though it was close, the party of moderation prevailed. A second trireme was instantly dispatched toward Lesbos in hope of overtaking the first one and spare the doomed Mytilenaeans. The Mytilenaeen envoys that had been brought to Athens provided wine and barley for the crew, promising a reward if the second trireme arrived first. The motivated sailors rowed non-stop, taking their meals while working to catch up with the first ship. They arrived just in time, as on Lesbos Paches had finished reading the decree and was preparing to enact the executions. As Thucydides drily puts it, “So near was Mytilenè to destruction.” (History of the Peloponnesian War, III.49)

4-Socrates goes to battle, peace breaks out, and Alcibiades undermines it (424 – 418 BCE)

In the year 424 BCE Socrates and Alcibiades found themselves in the middle of the bloodiest battle of the war up to that point, at Delium. There, the Athenians had fortified a sanctuary of Apollo— a sacrilegious act by the recognized standards of all Greek cities – in order to establish a military presence in the enemy territory of Boeotia. The Thebans attacked with an overwhelming force. Armed with an ingenious machine capable of throwing flames, they quickly threw the Athenians in disarray and forced them to retreat.

In the midst of the ensuing chaos, Socrates again displayed steadfastness and bravery, as described by his young friend Alcibiades:

It was worthwhile to behold Socrates when the army retreated in flight from Delium; for I happened to be there on horseback and he was a hoplite. The soldiers were then in rout, and while he and [the general] Laches were retreating together, I came upon them by chance. ... I had an even finer opportunity to observe Socrates there than I had had at Potidaea. ... Walking there just as he does here in Athens, 'stalking like a pelican, his eyes darting from side to side,' quietly on the lookout for friends and foes, he made it plain to everyone even at a great distance that if one touches this real man, he will defend himself vigorously. [Plato, Symposium, 220d-221c]

In the end, about 500 Thebans and one thousand Athenians died at Delium, which turned into a humiliating defeat for Athens, especially given how close the battle site was to its own territory.

Socrates also played an important role in the last great event of this first phase of the Peloponnesian War, at Amphipolis in 422 BCE. He was 48 years old by then, but Diogenes Laertius tells us that “he took care to exercise his body and kept in good condition.” [Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, II.22] The events that led to the confrontation began at about the same time as the Battle of Delium, when the brilliant and ruthless Spartan general Brasidas laid siege to Amphipolis, in Thrace. This was an Athenian colony, the very one that was lost, as we have seen above, because the reinforcements headed by Thucydides himself arrived too late. The fall of Amphipolis, and the success of Brasidas in securing the allegiance of king Perdiccas II of Macedon, forced the Athenians into an armistice.

But Brasidas himself violated the terms of the treaty by attacking and capturing another Athenian satellite, Scione, which forced the Athenians to send an expeditionary force to recover it. Cleon – a member of the hawk faction in Athens, and in charge of the city at the time – headed for Thrace himself, bringing 30 ships, 1,200 hoplites, and 300 cavalry. Brasidas could count on 300 cavalry and 2,000 hoplites. Initially both forces wished to avoid a pitched battle, but eventually Brasidas attacked and routed the Athenians. This was a disaster for Athens, which lost 600 men against only seven Spartan casualties. However, those

casualties included Brasidas himself, an immense loss that was somewhat blunted by the fact that Cleon too lost his life in the battle.

Amphipolis had drained the will to fight in both Athens and Sparta, as Thucydides tells us:

When Athens had received a second blow at Amphipolis, and Brasidas and Cleon, who had been the two greatest enemies of peace, the one because the war brought him success and reputation, and the other because he fancied that in quiet times his rogueries would be more transparent and his slanders less credible, had fallen in the battle, the two chief aspirants for political power end to the war at Athens and Sparta, Pleistoanax the son of Pausanias, king of the Lacedaemonians, and Nicias the son of Niceratus the Athenian, who had been the most fortunate general of his day, became more eager than ever to make an end of the war.
[History of the Peloponnesian War, V.16]

The Peace of Nicias, as it came to be called, was signed in 421 BCE. Most of the members of the Peloponnesian League agreed to it, with the exceptions of Boeotia, Corinth, Elis, and Megara. The peace was meant to last 50 years. In reality, it held only until 414 BCE, after which hostilities broke again.

The Great Peloponnesian War was now at an impasse. True, the two superpowers – Athens and Sparta – had signed a peace agreement, but just as in the case of the USA and the USSR during the second half of the 20th century, “peace” is a relative term. In reality, there was constant fighting by proxy during the six and a half years that passed

before full resumption of hostilities. Thucydides tells us that the whole conflict lasted 27 years, because he includes the time of the Peace of Nicias in it, wryly commenting that “if any one argue that the interval during which the truce continued should be excluded, he is mistaken” [History of the Peloponnesian War, V.26]. One of the problems was that two relatively minor powers, Corinth and Argos, distrusted the peace accord, and the Argives even harbored hopes of replacing Sparta as the dominant city-state in the Peloponnesus.

Meanwhile, in Athens, although Cleon the warmonger was dead, the hawk party saw a bright new star suddenly on the rise: none other than Alcibiades, the adoptive son of Pericles. Alcibiades wanted to end the Peace of Nicias, probably in great part because he was ambitious, and there was no better place than the battlefield for a young man to prove his worth and further increase his prestige. According to Thucydides, who knew him personally, Alcibiades’ pride had also been wounded by the Spartan decision to negotiate with Nicias, despite the fact that it was Alcibiades’ family that had been the *proxeni*, that is diplomatic representatives, of Athens in Lacedaemon. Since Alcibiades was still relatively young and inexperienced, while Nicias was an established general, this gives us further insight as to the oversized ego of our “hero.”

Alcibiades saw that one way to thrust a wedge into the peace accord was for Athens to form an alliance with Argos, which had the interesting double feature of being a democracy – and thus more naturally inclined toward Athens than Sparta – and of being located in the

Peloponnese – thus in a position to directly challenge the Spartan hegemony. On his own initiative, since he had no official powers in Athens, Alcibiades sent a message to the Argives, asking them to dispatch representatives to Athens as soon as possible, and at the same time suggesting they should work hard on an alliance with the similarly minded cities of Mantinea and Elis.

Alcibiades' message alerted the Argives to a new warming up of the conflict between Athens and Sparta, and convinced them to turn away from ongoing negotiations with Sparta and seek an alliance with Athens instead. The three cities (Argos, Mantinea, and Elis) promptly sent a joint embassy to Athens. The Lacedaemonians countered with an embassy of their own, as they were now afraid of the potential consequences of a new alliance between Athens and Argos.

The Spartan envoys made reasonable proposals to the Athenian council, specifying that they had come with full powers of negotiation. This alarmed Alcibiades: if the Spartans were to make the same proposals and reassurances to the full Athenian popular assembly, the alliance with Argos would likely be rejected. And here is where we have a full display of the cunning and at the same time the duplicitousness of Alcibiades. He approached the Spartan envoys proposing that he would use his influence in the assembly on their behalf, brokering a compromise favorable to Sparta, on condition that they did not reveal to the full assembly what they had just told the council: the fact that they had full diplomatic powers. His actual goal was to discredit the Spartans in front of the assembly and

to alienate them from Nicias, who was still regarded as the chief Athenian negotiator.

The Spartan envoys fell for the trick. When they were asked in front of the assembly whether they had come with full powers, they replied that they hadn't, which directly contradicted what they had previously told the council. Alcibiades publicly revealed the contradiction, accusing the Lacedaemonians of being untrustworthy. The people of Athens at this point were ready to vote an alliance with Argos, but the vote was postponed because of an earthquake. No major action, diplomatic or otherwise, was taken in case of natural disasters, so that there should be time for the priests to interpret the meaning of the event.

Nicias too fell for Alcibiades' trick, and could not understand why the Spartans had reneged their word. Even so, when the assembly resumed deliberation he still argued that it was not in the interest of Athens to renew the war, and that the Argives should be kept at bay until they had clarified their intentions with regard to Sparta. Nicias obtained permission to go to Sparta as part of a diplomatic mission to see if Athens could get enough concessions from their former enemy that would help keep the peace that he himself had brokered just a few years earlier. The mission failed because of Spartan intransigence, and Nicias returned to Athens empty handed. This infuriated his fellow citizens, and Alcibiades predictably took advantage of the situation, decidedly shifting things in favor of the alliance with Argos.

Inevitably, this maneuvering led back to open conflict, resulting in the Battle of Mantinea of 418 BCE. It is

important to understand that both Sparta and one of its two kings, Agis, were in serious trouble at this juncture. Sparta's reputation had suffered militarily after two defeats at Pylos and Sphacteria. Its reputation was further affected when the Spartans were prohibited from participating in the Olympic Games of 420 BCE and to properly sacrifice at the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. King Agis, on his part, was harshly criticized for having inexplicably sent home his army and concluded his previous campaign with a truce. In an unprecedented decision, he was allowed to take the field again only under the supervision of ten advisors. Had he not accepted this humiliating condition, his house would have been destroyed and he would have personally been fined the large sum of 100,000 drachmas. The Spartans meant business, even with their own.

At the battle of Mantinea, the Lacedaemonians and their allies fielded about 9,000 hoplites, facing a similar force of 8,000 from the Argives, the Athenians, and their allies. Initially, things seemed to go in favor of the democratic cities, in part because of yet another blunder by Agis, who first created a hole in his defensive lines by redeploying some of his troops, and then caused more chaos by ordering two contingents to move quickly to close the gap. He was likely saved by the fact that two of his lieutenants either failed or refused to comply with the sudden order. The Argives and the Mantineans managed to break through the first gap and route the Spartan veterans that faced them. But the Spartans and one group of allies broke through the Athenian and Argive lines, causing panic and retreat. The battle ended with an unquestionable Spartan victory, with about 300 losses on the Spartan side and a

whopping 1,100 among the Argives, Athenians, and Mantineans.

As a result of their victory, the Spartans managed to recover from the brink of disaster, breaking up the democratic alliance that had included some of their own powerful neighbors, and once again rising to the level of Athens as a superpower of the Greek world. Argos' democracy was overturned in an internal coup led by a thousand aristocrats, and Alcibiades' clever plan came to nothing.

Throughout the various diplomatic exchanges and physical confrontations each side kept talking about what is right and what is just, with justice and righteousness, of course, invariably being on the Athenian side as far as Athens was concerned, and just as predictably on the Spartan side according to the Spartans. But Thucydides at one point relates a starkly frank dialogue between an Athenian representative and one from the island of Melos, an ally of Sparta that Athens put under siege. During the negotiations to lift the siege, the Athenian bluntly states:

We both alike know that into the discussion of human affairs the question of justice only enters where there is equal power to enforce it, and that the powerful exact what they can, and the weak grant what they must. [History of the Peloponnesian War, V.89]

The outcome was that the Melians eventually had to surrender. The Athenians then put to death all Melian men of military age, enslaved the women and children, and

recolonized the island with thirty-five hundred of their settlers. So much for justice and righteousness.

5-Alcibiades and the invasion of Sicily (415 – 413 BCE)

Alcibiades was determined to continue the Athenian war and his major role in it. Undaunted by his failed attempt to use Argos against the Spartans and with no remorse for the political maneuvering he had played to achieve his goal, he now turned his eyes toward an even bigger prize: Sicily. The excuse for Athens to send a large expeditionary force to the island was that some of the Ionian cities there had requested Athenian support against the dominance of Syracuse, which was of Dorian ethnicity, like Lacedaemon. Thucydides, however, was not fooled for a moment about the real motivations of his compatriots, from Alcibiades down:

Such was the great island on which the Athenians were determined to make war. They virtuously professed that they were going to assist their own kinsmen and their newly-acquired allies, but the simple truth was that they aspired to the empire of Sicily. [History of the Peloponnesian War, VI.6]

If conquered, Sicily would have supplied Athens with vast additional resources, beginning with grains and continuing with men and ships from the Ionian allies and the Dorian subjects. But it is fair to say, which was also Thucydides' assessment, that Athens grossly underestimated the difficulties presented by opening a second front in a war that was already not going terribly well. And they underestimated the prowess of Syracuse. Although the

Athenian expedition was impressive, initially comprising 100 ships and 5,000 infantry, it only included 30 horses, a puny number that soon proved woefully inadequate for the onslaught brought by the Syracusan cavalry.

Nevertheless, the decision was made, and in 415 BCE, Athens geared up for the daring enterprise. Three commanders with full powers were appointed for the occasion: Alcibiades, Nicias, and Lamachus, the son of Xenophanes. Nicias was appointed against his will, and actually warned his fellow citizens that they were embarking on the effort on the basis of flimsy excuses and certainly without the necessary preparation. He directly and harshly (and yet, correctly) attacked his co-commander, Alcibiades, accusing him of not acting in the best interest of the state, but only in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement. Alcibiades, without any self-irony, responded by parading his vanity:

In consequence of the distinguished manner in which I represented the state at Olympia, the other Hellenes formed an idea of our power which even exceeded the reality, although they had previously imagined that we were exhausted by war. I sent into the lists seven chariots – no other private man ever did the like; I was victor, and also won the second and fourth prize; and I ordered everything in a style worthy of my victory.
[History of the Peloponnesian War, VI.16]

Thucydides presents us with a sober analysis of Alcibiades' motives, and it is not a flattering one. Alcibiades was a natural political enemy of Nicias, but most of all he badly wanted to command the expedition. He dreamed of conquering not just Sicily, but Carthage – which at the time

had a foothold in Sicily, and which later on became one of the first great rivals of another rising Mediterranean power, Rome. He was certainly after glory, but also after money. The sort of extravagant expenditure he brazenly mentioned in his response to Nicias put a serious dent in his resources, as large as they were. His constant quest for exotic pleasures, his maniacal need to compete in sports events and make sure he vanquished any competitor all cost significant amounts of money. And war conquest was the surest way to replenish his coffers.

In the end, Alcibiades carried the day in the assembly. The majority of the people were positively enthusiastic about the idea of a Sicilian expedition, and the skeptical minority was afraid to speak out for fear of being labeled unpatriotic – something that should sound familiar to 21st century audiences. But at the height of the preparations, just when Alcibiades' scheming seemed to be guaranteeing the desired outcome, something strange and disturbing happened. One night, the Hermae were mutilated throughout the city.

The Hermae were square stone figures carved in the ancient Athenian fashion, explains Thucydides, disseminated everywhere, situated at the entrance of temples as well as of private homes. On that fateful night, someone went around systematically disfiguring the faces of the Hermae, a sacrilegious act that shocked the Athenians and that required immediate investigation and punishment of the culprits. Moreover, there was a rumor that a group of young and arrogant aristocrats had performed the sacred rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries – normally celebrated every year as part of the cult of

Demeter and Persephone –in their private homes, as a game.

We do not know whether Alcibiades and some of his friends were responsible for these sacrileges, perhaps at the end of yet another night of excessive drinking, or whether someone else did it as part of a plot to undermine the young commander. Some suspected a group of Spartan sympathizers, including Xenophon, the general and historian. We do know that a plot of some sort was afoot against Alcibiades, though. Once accused he demanded an immediate trial, so that the episode would not interfere with the imminent departure of the Sicilian expedition. But his request was not granted, and he was allowed to sail for Sicily while the charges were pending. This, possibly, was done at the behest of his political enemies, who thus bought themselves more time to prepare their prosecution and to undermine public confidence in Alcibiades.

Despite the incident of the Hermae, the ambitious Athenian expedition to Sicily began with great hopes and only a minority of people worried about the hubris of it all. Meanwhile, in Syracuse itself many did not believe the danger was imminent, or that it was that serious, despite one of the local leaders, Hermocrates, giving a public speech in which he painted a dark picture of the near future.

As a matter of fact, the Athenians did not find much of a welcome among the Greek colonies scattered along the southern Italian coast. The expeditionary force was not allowed within city walls, and no open markets to trade goods were set for them outside the walls, as was

customary in such circumstances. The Athenians were permitted to anchor their ships and to get water, but not much else.

More welcoming was the Sicilian city of Catana, which invited the Athenian fleet to move from its temporary headquarters in Rhegium, on the southern tip of the peninsula, to Catana itself, positioned on the same eastern side of the island as Syracuse, about 40 miles north of it. However, in Catana the Athenians found the ship Salamina, which had been sent from home to retrieve Alcibiades, relieve him of command, and bring him to Athens for trial. But Alcibiades was prepared. Fearing an unfair trial, he managed to escape with some of his comrades to Thurii, in modern Calabria, on the Italian mainland. From there he crossed the Ionic sea and landed in Peloponnesus. He was now a fugitive, and was condemned to death in absentia.

Moreover, he had already begun to do damage to his native city. The Athenians had set up a scheme to gain possession of the important city of Messenè, on the northeastern tip of Sicily, by making contact with someone on the inside who would betray his fellow citizens and open the gates to the Athenian army – a standard way, at the time, to acquire new territory without bloodshed. Alcibiades was of course aware of the Athenian plot and alerted the Syracusan representatives in Messenè before escaping. As a result, Messenè was not captured, and the Spartans – who supported Syracuse – now owed one to Alcibiades.

This series of events led to a spectacle that few would have foreseen just months earlier: the simultaneous appearance

in the Lacedaemonian assembly of emissaries from Corinth and Syracuse, there to discuss the ongoing war, as well as the lone figure of Alcibiades, a fugitive from Athens come to make his case for why Sparta should welcome him.

In the first place, Alcibiades had to explain why someone from a democratic polis would help an oligarchic one like Sparta. To this, Alcibiades claimed to be a democrat not in the sense that he favored the rule of the people, but in the (much) broader sense that he and his family had always opposed tyranny. A oligarchy, technically not being a tyranny, would therefore fit in his broadened conception of democracy. Second, Alcibiades exaggerated to the Spartans and their allies the scope of the Athenian plan, presenting what had been his own secret ambitions as if they were the stated intentions of its former fellow citizens. Namely, to first conquer Syracuse, then the entirety of Sicily, to move against Carthage, and finally to bring the might of all of Hellas to bear against the Peloponnesians. This calamity could only be avoided, he argued, if Sparta were to lend concrete aid to the imperiled Syracusans, failing which the survival of Sparta itself would soon be in doubt.

Furthermore – and this was a crucial suggestion that will significantly alter the trajectory of the war – Alcibiades advised the Spartans to occupy and fortify Decelea. This was only 200 stadia (i.e., about 14 miles) from Athens, a place from which one could see Athens itself and even the ships entering its port, Piraeus. Decelea was at the crossroads of important trade routes to Euboea, Tanagra, Delium, and Chalcis, and controlling it would not be just a huge blow to the morale of the Athenians, it would make it much more difficult for them to receive supplies and to

move freely within Attica. The advice was followed, resulting in endless difficulties for Athens from that moment on. Finally, Alcibiades gave the following masterful piece of rationalization to explain his betrayal of the city where he was born:

An exile I am indeed; I have lost an ungrateful country, but I have not lost the power of doing you service, if you will listen to me. The true enemies of my country are not those who, like you, have injured her in open war, but those who have compelled her friends to become her enemies. I love Athens, not in so far as I am wronged by her, but in so far as I once enjoyed the privileges of a citizen. The country which I am attacking is no longer mine, but a lost country which I am seeking to regain. He is the true patriot, not who, when unjustly exiled, abstains from attacking his country, but who in the warmth of his affection seeks to recover her without regard to the means. [History of the Peloponnesian War, VI.92]

That, as Thucydides tells us, concluded the seventeenth year of the war.

6-The Sicilian disaster (415 – 413 BCE)

Militarily speaking, the Athenian adventure in Sicily began well. Although the second general in command, Lamachus, died almost immediately, Nicias – now solely in charge of the expedition – inflicted a series of losses to the Syracusans, so much so that, with no help yet forthcoming from Sparta, the latter began negotiations, though nothing came of it. The Athenians then set out to build a double wall that, once completed, would block access to the city and very likely spell the end of Syracuse. As a countermeasure, the Syracusans started construction of their own wall, positioned at an angle with respect to the enemy's one. If they managed to finish it, this would preempt the Athenian scheme. It was a building race with the highest stakes.

The Spartans did manage to send one of their generals, Gylippus, to Syracuse. He had, however, initially made a blunder by confining the army within the walls of the city, thus making the powerful Syracusan cavalry utterly useless. But Gylippus was humble enough to admit to and try to repair his mistakes. He therefore instructed the cavalry to begin sorties to interfere with the construction of the Athenian wall, while at the same time training the Syracusans in naval warfare, which – rather surprisingly for a city built on the coast – was alien to them. Moreover, Gylippus also went to work diplomatically, forging an anti-Athenian coalition in Sicily, succeeding in bringing a number of other cities on board. These combined moves soon turned out to be crucial in altering the course of the

conflict. Indeed, the situation quickly became so dire for the Athenians that Nicias realized that they would have either to retreat or to get significant reinforcements from the motherland.

To get an idea of the ingenuity and efforts on both sides, consider that Thucydides even records instances of underwater warfare! The Syracusans planted stakes that were not visible from above the water line, like a sunken reef, and which would impale any approaching vessel. The Athenians sent divers to saw off the stakes, but the Syracusans re-installed them.

Meanwhile, back in Greece, the Spartans moved quickly to enact Alcibiades' treacherous advice: they set out to fortify Decelea, from which they controlled the most fertile part of the Athenian countryside and – perhaps more important from the point of view of morale – which could be clearly seen from Athens. Once the fortification was completed an army constituted with help from all members of the Peloponnesian League manned the fort and used it as a base to carry out incursions into Athenian territory, causing much devastation and loss of life, which Thucydides argues was a significant factor in the eventual fall of Athens. If this is a correct assessment, Alcibiades will have played a major role in the ultimate defeat of his fellow Athenians. One cannot but wonder what Socrates was thinking of his former pupil during this time. Or, for that matter, whether Alcibiades had a thought to spare for his mentor while he was busy plotting against Athens.

The Syracusans by now were aware that Nicias had been successful in his plea and that Athenian reinforcements

were coming. Demosthenes and Eurymedon had been put in charge of an additional 73 ships and 5,000 infantry. The defenders therefore decided to gamble and attempt a dual attack on the original Athenian force, before it could receive aid. Gylippus led the Syracusan army on land, while the navy bore on the Athenian ships from the outside. The Syracusans had learned from their early defeat at sea, and made an important change to their vessels to take advantage of the fact that the Athenians were forced to maneuver in a restricted space near the shore. The Syracusan ships were modified by cutting down and strengthening the prows, which were now equipped with thicker projecting beams. The idea was to assault the Athenians prow to prow, given that the lighter and faster Athenian vessels were not going to have enough space to turn around and attack on the flank, which was their usual strategy. And if that were not enough, the Syracusan ships carried expert javelin throwers, who could do mayhem once their ship got close enough to an enemy vessel.

For two days the rival navies simply engaged in occasional skirmishes, 75 vessels on the Athenian side, 80 on the Syracusan. Just imagine the spectacle that this massive deployment of ships must have provided to the inhabitants of Syracuse, who were anxiously watching the battle. On the third day the Syracusans made a move that turned out to be brilliant. Ariston, son of Pyrrichus, was a Corinthian, and the best pilot in the Syracusan navy. He asked the city's authorities to compel the city's food merchants to bring their market outside the walls, near the anchored vessels, so that his crews could quickly eat the midday meal and take back to the sea without delay. The Athenians saw their opponents' vessels retreat and – arrogant as they were –

thought this was an admission that the Sicilians had lost the fight. As a result, the Athenian sailors also disembarked and went about preparing their meals. As they were in the middle of it, to their consternation they saw the Syracusan navy bearing on them. They scrambled to their feet but managed only a disorganized response and the day ended with a significant Syracusan win, which of course both caused despondency among the Athenians and boosted self-confidence and morale among the besieged.

But now Demosthenes' fleet arrived from Athens, throwing the Syracusans into utter consternation. Despite the damage inflicted to them by the Spartans controlling Decelea, Athens had been able to field a second expedition just as large as the first one! Demosthenes was aware of the psychological advantage, the same one Nicias had had upon his own arrival, and that he had wasted by wintering in Catana. Demosthenes resolved that the war against the Syracusans should be won then and there, and that failing this they would pack and go home. He also saw that one crucial action could turn the tide in favor of the Athenians: the taking of Epipolae, a cliff above the city, which would give him the high ground from which his troops would then easily take control of the interference wall built by the Syracusans. And if they managed to do that, the city would surely fall. In addition, the arrival of the second Athenian fleet meant that the Syracusans no longer dared venturing on the open sea, given that they were now massively outnumbered. All of a sudden, things looked bright for the Athenian contingent.

The problem was that to approach Epipolae undetected during the day was simply impossible. So Demosthenes

resolved to mount an attack at night, a very rare tactic at the time. The advancing Athenian army managed to surprise the Syracusan garrison at the fort and overwhelm it. But a number of defenders escaped and sounded the alarm. The element of surprise was already gone.

The Syracusans counterattack was immediate, but Demosthenes' men were determined not to lose momentum and managed to push the enemy back. As a result, part of the Syracusan interference wall was indeed captured, as originally planned. Gylippus incited the Sicilian forces, but his soldiers were amazed at the daring of their opponents, who managed to repel them. At this point, though, the Athenian troops felt too confident and began to fight in a disorderly fashion. The Boeotians, which were part of the Syracusan defenses, managed to gain the upper hand and inflict losses on the attackers, who were put to flight. Both armies were now in a state of confusion.

Although there was a bright moon that night over Syracuse, large numbers of heavy-armed troops on both sides were maneuvering in small spaces, with each soldier only being able to distinguish the silhouette of whoever was right in front of him. The majority of the Athenian army had not even engaged in the battle yet, but was now confronted with some of their own, fleeing the advance of the Boeotians. Nobody knew who was who, and a number of Athenians fell at the hand of their own comrades, what we today call friendly fire. Many of the fleeing soldiers fell to their death from the cliff, and the strugglers were cut down by the Syracusan cavalry once daybreak came. The assault on Epipolae was a disaster for the Athenians, and immediately afterward Gylippus left Syracuse in search of

additional reinforcements, determined to amass a sufficiently large army to dispatch of the enemy once and for all.

In the wake of the astounding defeat, Demosthenes held a war council to decide on the further course of action, and proposed what he had said he was going to do from the beginning: if the daring action at Epipolae should fail then it would be wiser for the Athenians to cut their losses and retreat from Sicily. Nicias, however, refused to withdraw, in part, we are told by Thucydides, because he was in contact with a party inside Syracuse that was attempting to negotiate a surrender of the city. Moreover, Nicias was old and experienced enough to know that his fellow citizens back home would not take kindly to the dishonor of retreat, and would probably condemn him to death for cowardly conduct. He preferred to die in battle than to be executed at home.

While the Athenians debated the issue, Gylippus returned to Syracuse with a large contingent of reinforcements. This again tipped the balance, and now even Nicias agreed that retreat was the only viable option. But astronomy and superstition got in the way of a safe Athenian withdrawal. A lunar eclipse took place, and the superstitious soldiers begged their generals not to sail home under such a negative omen. Unfortunately for them, they found a sympathetic ear in Nicias, who was notoriously superstitious and bewitched by the practice of divination.

The Syracusans, confident because of their success, began preparation for an assault on land and by sea that would allow them to finish off their enemies. They amassed a

number of vessels with the intention of closing the mouth of the Great Harbor and trap their opponents. Meanwhile, the escape plan hatched by the Athenians contemplated two possibilities. The first attempt would consist in boarding every man on the available ships and forcing the blockade in order to head toward the friendly port of Catana. Failing that, they would retreat by land, heading toward the nearest territory that was not hostile, regardless of whether it turned out to be Greek or “barbarian.” Keep in mind that even at this low point, the Athenians could still count on 110 ships.

The Athenian squadron began to move toward the mouth of the Great Harbor, under the command of Demosthenes. As soon as they got close to the exit they were surrounded by Syracusan vessels and the engagement began. It was the fiercest fight yet, with one side increasingly feeling close to a great and unexpected victory against the most powerful city state in all of Greece, and the other side knowing all too well that this might be their last stand: get free or die. When ships got close to each other, javelin throwers joined the action, showering the approaching vessel with projectiles, after which the marines on each side started to board the nearest enemy ship, fighting hand to hand, as if they were on land.

It was a mess, with multiple ships entangled after striking each other, each crew finding itself on both the attack and the defense at once. The roar of the battle was so strong that the crews could not hear the commands issued by their own captains and had to guess and improvise. All of this was going on simultaneously with a land confrontation between the remaining Athenian forces, barricaded by a

wall near the shore to allow a possible retreat on land, and the Syracusan assailants. The Athenian land contingent kept following the ups and downs of the sea battle, hoping against reason that their side may decisively prevail. It didn't. The Syracusans got the upper hand and drove the remaining enemy ships back toward land. They beached in confusion, with the crews rushing out of each vessel. The land forces then split up, some rushing to succor the mariners, some to the wall to push back against the Syracusan assault that, if successful, would have meant the end right then and there. The Athenian army fell into panic.

The Syracusan commander, Hermocrates, appealed to his fellow citizens to strike the Athenians before they attempted to leave, but most of his own soldiers were so satisfied with the victory, and so in need of reprieve after the arduous battle, that there was no way to convince them to take the field again so soon. Hermocrates then enacted a canny stratagem. He sent some of his soldiers near the Athenian camp, pretending to be friends, to "alert" the invaders not to leave that night, because the Syracusans were guarding all the roads. Instead, they should prepare adequately and leave the following day. Apparently – at least according to Thucydides – the Athenians bought into it and delayed their departure. The delay allowed the Syracusan forces under Gylippus to position themselves along the possible escape routes, ready to block any Athenian attempt to slip out.

It was only on the third day after the sea battle that the Athenians finally went on the move. They were dispirited and carried insufficient provisions. But they still numbered

forty thousand men, a formidable army to contend with under any circumstances. After a couple of engagements with the Syracusans, Nicias and Demosthenes decided to march at night, to minimize exposure. But this strategy ended up separating the Athenians into two contingents, one commanded by Nicias, the other by Demosthenes. Once the Syracusans figured out what the Athenians were up to they followed them and came upon Demosthenes' army first. The Syracusan cavalry easily pushed their enemies into a narrow space, with Nicias' soldiers now six miles away. Demosthenes arranged his men in battle order and prepared to confront the onslaught with whatever he had left. He was surrounded, and the Syracusans began hurling missiles in order to cause as much death, panic, and destruction as possible. At length Demosthenes surrendered, on condition that his 6,000 remaining men would not be killed.

On the following day, the Syracusans caught up with Nicias and his soldiers, and told them of the fate of their comrades. No agreement to surrender was reached, and the two forces engaged in battle. The remaining Athenians rushed toward a nearby river, the Assinarus, hoping for relief from the enemy's cavalry. But by this point there was no order in their movement, just a general disorganized rush. The Syracusans had an easy enough time slaughtering their opponents and Nicias at last had to surrender. He did so to the Spartan Gylippus, whom he trusted more than the Syracusans. Gylippus agreed not to kill the surviving Athenians and instead to take them prisoners.

Once back in Syracuse, 7,000 captured Athenian soldiers were imprisoned in the quarries and eventually sold into

slavery. Both Demosthenes and Nicias were put to the sword, over the objections of Gylippus. As Thucydides drily comments at the end of book VII of his History:

Fleet and army perished from the face of the earth; nothing was saved, and of the many who went forth few returned home. Thus ended the Sicilian expedition. [History of the Peloponnesian War, VII.87]

7-One last hurrah for Alcibiades and the capitulation of Athens (411 – 404 BCE)

When news of the disaster reached Athens the people did not, at first, believe it. It was simply inconceivable that such a great expedition had failed so miserably. Once they accepted the truth, though, the people were angry with the leaders and orators who had promoted it – as if, observes Thucydides, the people themselves had not enthusiastically voted in favor of the assault against Syracuse.

Meanwhile the Spartan control of Decelea, following Alcibiades' treacherous advice, was proving highly damaging to Athens' interests. Spartan helots liberated the mind boggling number of 20,000 Athenian slaves in the nearby silver mines, thus dealing a severe blow to the financial basis of the Athenian empire. Athens was forced to increase the tributes from its allies, which predictably led to a series of revolts, encouraged by the Lacedaemonians. Soon it began to look like Athens was at the end of the rope.

Alcibiades, once again, played no minor destructive role in all this. He personally made the rounds of the Ionian cities to foment their revolt against Athens, succeeding in detaching from the Delian League the crucial city of Chios. He went so far as to lead the Chian troops, now hostile to Athens. He then stopped at Miletus, where he had friends

in high positions, and convinced the Milesians to join the Spartan effort. The Spartans themselves sought to widen their coalition and made a crucial alliance with the Persians, in the person of the satrap Tissaphernes, serving under king Darius II. In fact, Alcibiades fought on the side of the Milesians under Tissaphernes, against the Athenian contingent sent to quell the rebellion. To make things even worse for the Athenians, the major cities on the island of Rhodes also rebelled and joined the Peloponnesian League.

One may well wonder what kept Athens fighting given all these decidedly unfavorable turns of events. A number of factors likely played a role. For one, the chief Lacedaemonian allies, Corinth and Syracuse, were slow at sending their fleets in support of Spartan operations in the Aegean Sea. The Persians too acted slowly on their promise of funds and ships. Also, the newly “free” Ionian cities were disappointed in not receiving the aid and protection they expected, and eventually rejoined the Athenian block. Finally, the Athenians had been careful at the beginning of the war, setting aside an emergency reserve in their treasury and, just as importantly, 100 ships that had not been engaged so far. Those ships now became the formidable core of yet another Athenian fleet to contend with.

But the 20th year of the war, as chronicled by Thucydides, brought an additional unexpected plot twist: Alcibiades fell under increasing suspicion at Sparta, and there was considerable pressure for him to be put to death. What had happened? Alcibiades had seduced king Agis’ wife, Timaea, and got her pregnant. She gave birth to a son, Leotychides, and she did not even attempt to conceal his paternity. So

now Alcibiades was on the run again. He certainly couldn't go back to Athens, where he had been condemned to death, so he headed for the only other option available: none other than the Persian satrap, Tissaphernes. As he had done before with the Spartans, Alcibiades proved himself perfectly capable of giving valuable advice to his new protector, this time against both Sparta and Athens:

Let the dominion [i.e., Hellas] only remain divided, and then, whichever of the two rivals [Sparta or Athens] was troublesome, the [Persian] King might always use the other against him. But if one defeated the other and became supreme on both elements, who would help Tissaphernes to overthrow the conqueror? He would have to take the field in person and fight, which he might not like, at great risk and expense. The danger would be easily averted at a fraction of the cost, and at no risk to himself, if he wore out the Hellenes in internal strife. [History of the Peloponnesian War, VIII.46]

According to Thucydides, Alcibiades' real motive was not to help the Persians, but rather to find a way back to Athens! Bizarre as this may sound, Thucydides has a point. Alcibiades sent a message to the Athenian contingent on the island of Samos, a state that had recently become a democracy, having thrown out the previous oligarchic government after killing two hundred aristocrats. The soldiers there knew that Alcibiades had Tissaphernes' ear, and realized just how important that might be to their cause. Alcibiades promised to broker Persian help, so long as the "villainous democracy" that had sent him into exile would be overthrown. Accordingly, a plan was soon

hatched on Samos to undo the democratic government in Athens.

Stunningly, despite some initial resistance, Alcibiades' emissaries in Athens managed to convince the Athenian people that only Alcibiades could deliver them the Persian support, and that such support was predicated on a "wiser" government than the one now in charge. The Athenians decided that a delegation should be sent to negotiate with Tissaphernes and Alcibiades.

But events took a sudden turn when a group of young supporters of Alcibiades assassinated one of the leaders of the democratic government in Athens, triggering a sudden change whereby the one hundred year old democracy turned overnight into an oligarchy, the so-called rule of the Four Hundred, from the number of aristocrats sitting in the new city council.

The coup succeeded on the day of June 9th, 411 BCE. But the new oligarchy was immediately undermined by the fact that a second, coordinated coup in Samos failed. The Athenian navy was stationed at Samos and remained loyal to the democracy, leaving the government of the Four Hundred without a fleet.

The sailors and soldiers stationed at Samos soundly rejected the legitimacy of the rule of the Four Hundred, declaring that it wasn't them who rebelled against their city, but the other way around. They deposed the generals in charge at Samos, elected new ones and – irony of ironies – recalled Alcibiades and declared him their leader in the effort to reestablish democracy in their home city. So now

Athens was governed by an oligarchy at home, but had to contend with a pro-democracy navy abroad. And Alcibiades, true to character, had been instrumental on both sides.

The rule of the Four Hundred did not last long. Undermined by their own navy, divided by the formation of internal factions of moderates and extremists, and suspected of making overtures to the Spartans, they survived until shortly after the crucial battle of Cyzicus in 410 BCE, where the Athenian navy commanded by Alcibiades completely destroyed their Spartan opponents. This victory led to a domino effect that allowed Athens to retake control of a number of cities in the Hellespont. The defeated Spartans went so far as making a peace offer, which was – again – soundly rejected.

It is interesting to see how many times the Peloponnesian War came close to an end because one party or the other sought a peace accord, depending on the constantly shifting fortunes encountered by both Sparta and Athens. It is also fascinating to contemplate that the Athenians managed to put the Spartans in a sufficiently bad position to force them to seek a cessation of hostilities despite the monumental disaster in Syracuse, the loss of many of their Ionian tributaries, and the Persian support of Sparta.

How had Alcibiades managed so rapid changes of fortune on behalf of the Athenians? By treachery, as usual. We have already seen his scheming with Tissaphernes. In turn, he promised Persian support to the Athenians – in the form of a number of Phoenician ships to aid them against the Peloponnesians. As Thucydides puts it:

Thus Alcibiades frightened the Athenians with Tissaphernes, and Tissaphernes with the Athenians. [History of the Peloponnesian War, VIII.82]

The fact is that Athens won a series of battles between 410 and 406 BCE either directly or indirectly because of Alcibiades' involvement. But even Alcibiades, of course, was not infallible. For one thing, he had overplayed the degree of support he had from Tissaphernes. For another, Tissaphernes turned out not to trust Alcibiades at all. After yet another battle the Athenians won because of Alcibiades' intervention – at Abydos, in November 411 BCE – Alcibiades went to visit Tissaphernes bearing gifts. He was promptly imprisoned because, explained Tissaphernes, the Persian king had ordered him to make war against the Athenians. Xenophon, who has by now taken over the chronicling of the war from Thucydides, tells us that Alcibiades managed to escape a month later, shortly thereafter delivering Byzantium to Athens by having an inside party opening the gates to the Athenian troops.

In 407 BCE Alcibiades made his triumphal return to Athens, hailed a hero and savior of the motherland – never mind his repeated disloyalty and even treachery. Xenophon relates that:

[Alcibiades] was proclaimed general-in-chief with absolute authority, the people thinking that he was the man to recover for the state its former power; then, as his first act, he led out all his troops and conducted by land the procession of the Eleusinian Mysteries. [Hellenica, I.4.20]

The irony is strong here. Not only Athens recalled and glorified the man who had been directly responsible for innumerable disasters, but allowed him to lead the very kind of religious rite that he had been condemned for mocking only a few years earlier. Nevertheless, Alcibiades' new glow did not last long. The following year the Athenians suffered a minor naval defeat at Notium, which resulted in Alcibiades not being re-elected general. He did not take it well and exiled himself, this time permanently. He would never again command Athenian troops.

Later that same year, 406 BCE, the Athenian assembly made yet another catastrophic decision. Their fleet won a great victory against the Spartan navy at Arginusae, on the coast of modern-day Turkey. But fate intervened in the form of a fierce storm that precluded the Athenians from rescuing the crews of 25 of their own ships that had either been disabled or sunk. As a result, a large number of sailors drowned. This caused furor back in Athens and the eight generals held to be responsible were put on trial. Two of them fled, but the remaining six returned to Athens to defend themselves.

The mood of the crowd, initially favorable, turned hostile to the generals because of the festival of the Apaturia, which traditionally brought families together. The absence of the drowned sailors was magnified and made all the more evident, and somebody had to pay for it. A minor politician named Callixeinus made the proposal of trying the generals en bloc, rather than one by one.

Euryptolemus, a cousin of Alcibiades, and a number of others objected that such a proposal was unconstitutional. In retort, Callixeinus suggested that the same treatment be

extended to whoever objected to his proposal. The opposition was therefore silenced.

Now the defense had one remaining move, and it involved Socrates. The law provided for a number of randomly selected councilmen to function as *prytaneis*, or presiding officers of the assembly. One of the *prytaneis* was appointed *epistates*, president of the assembly. That day the *epistates* was Socrates, holding public office for the only time in his life. He refused to allow the generals to be tried in unison, saying that “in no case would he act except in accordance with the law,” as Xenophon reports [Hellenica, I.7.15]. In the end, however, the obstacle was removed by a series of parliamentary maneuvers and the generals were condemned and executed, including Pericles the Younger, the illegitimate son of Pericles and his mistress Aspasia. As it had already happened often, and will happen again, the Athenians soon came to regret their decision, and charges were brought against Callixeinus and his supporters, who fled the city. Eventually, Callixeinus did return, but lived out the rest of his days despised by his countrymen, reportedly dying of starvation.

The year 405 BCE brought about the final disaster for Athens. The Athenian navy was stationed near Aegospotami, in the Hellespont, facing a Spartan fleet under the command of a new rising star: Lysander. The Athenians had unwisely chosen a vulnerable spot to beach their ships and forage, and Alcibiades warned them of their mistake. But two of the generals, Tydeus and Menander, pointedly rejected Alcibiades’ advice. They were in command now, not him. The result was a catastrophe, the last one of the war: Lysander’s ships attacked suddenly,

leaving no time to the Athenians to man their vessels. The battle was over quickly, with the Athenian fleet simply obliterated. The messenger ship Paralus was sent to Athens with news of the defeat, and Xenophon gives us an idea of the resulting scene:

It was at night that the Paralus arrived at Athens with tidings of the disaster, and a sound of wailing ran from Piraeus through the long walls to the city, one man passing on the news to another; and during that night no one slept, all mourning, not for the lost alone, but far more for their own selves, thinking that they would suffer such treatment as they had visited upon the Melians, colonists of the Lacedaemonians, after reducing them by siege, and upon the Histiaeans and Scionaeans and Toronaeans and Aeginetans and many other Greek peoples. [Hellenica, II.2.3]

At this point Athens had no resources left, and the population faced starvation. In 404 BCE the city surrendered unconditionally. By coincidence, Alcibiades also died that same year, hunted down in the wilderness of Phrygia (modern northwestern Anatolia) by Spartan spies. It was the end of the Great Peloponnesian War.

8-The aftermath: Socrates and the Thirty Tyrants (404 – 403 BCE)

The conditions of the surrender were harsh. Athens was stripped of its walls, its fleet – or what little remained of it – and all of its possessions. Sparta took over everything, including the flow of tributes from the former Athenian allies. Sparta did not share the tributes with its own allies, thus effectively replacing the Athenian empire with a Spartan one. So much for talk of “liberating” Hellas. Again, empires will be empires, and things haven’t changed much in the last two and a half millennia.

It could have been worse for the Athenians. Two of Sparta’s chief supporters, Corinth and Thebes, had actually proposed that Athens should be razed to the ground and its citizens enslaved, just as the Athenians themselves had done to others countless times. The Spartans refused, citing what Athens had done for Hellas in response to the Persian invasion, still fresh in people’s memories.

A puppet government was installed instead, known as the reign of the Thirty Tyrants. The most prominent of these was Critias, a first cousin of Plato. He had been banished by the previous democratic government, and was now out for revenge, keen on killing as many of his former opponents as possible.

One episode in particular from the brief reign of the Thirty Tyrants is interesting to recall, and Socrates himself describes what happened:

When the oligarchy came into power, the Thirty Commissioners in their turn summoned me and four others to the Round Chamber and instructed us to go and fetch Leon of Salamis from his home for execution. This was of course only one of many instances in which they issued such instructions, their object being to implicate as many people as possible in their crimes. On this occasion, however, I again made it clear, not by my words but by my actions, that the attention I paid to death was zero (if that is not too unrefined a claim); but that I gave all my attention to avoiding doing anything unjust or unholy. Powerful as it was, that government did not terrify me into doing a wrong action. When we came out of the rotunda, the other four went to Salamis and arrested Leon, but I simply went home. [Plato, Apology, 32c-d]

This was not the only confrontation between Socrates and the Thirty. In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon recounts another episode, in which Critias and the others ordered the philosopher not to give instruction or speak to anyone. Socrates made fun of them by asking whether he was allowed to buy food in the marketplace, which obviously required him to speak to people.

The following year, 403 BCE, the Thirty were overthrown and democracy was restored. Athens will recover a modicum of influence during the Corinthian War of 395-387 BCE, which featured Sparta on one side and a coalition of cities including Argos, Athens, Corinth, and Thebes on the other side. That coalition was backed by the Persians, in

essence still following Alcibiades' advice to keep pitting Greek against Greek in order to eventually prevail. But prevail they did not, as things came to a screeching halt with the invasion of Greece by Philip II of Macedon in 330 BCE. He managed to subjugate all Greek city-states except Sparta, which was left for his son, Alexander the Great, to finish off in 331 BCE.

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